

Developing a *Working* Marketing Plan

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Many years ago I worked for a large accounting firm and each year we spent several weeks creating a marketing plan. Upon completion, it was reviewed, bound, and stuck on a shelf until the following year. The plan accomplished nothing.

Developing a marketing plan for your business doesn't have to be a daunting task. Investing a little time will yield great dividends. Here are a few things to keep in mind.

Your plan should be a *working* document, a road map for your business. It should be designed to help you understand and grow your business. I recommend housing it in a three ring binder so you can change and add to it when necessary, include blank note pages, store relevant articles and expand on it throughout the course of the year.

Your marketing plan should include, at the very least, the following:

- List of products and services
- Detailed description of your target markets
- Challenges and competitive analysis
- Annual budget
- Identification of appropriate marketing vehicles
- Calendar with deadlines and expectations
- Goals; specific and quantifiable that can be monitored throughout the year

PRODUCTS & SERVICES

Your list should include all the services you offer including any you provide free of charge. Note which products or services are new, which will be offered in the coming year, which will be phased out, and those that are unique in the market. You might also want to write a list of products and services that you would like to offer this year or next year to begin the planning process.

TARGET MARKET

Next identify your target market. First, where are they located? Local, regional or national? Then define each target market as specifically as possible. Very often I have clients who say, "Everyone can use my product." This is rarely true. For example, while many adults might be able to use your product or service, when you start to think about specifics such as income level, geographic location, and marital status, you can begin to fine tune your market and therefore your strategy. Fine tuning this information will allow you to more accurately target your marketing budget as well.

If your target market is business-to-business rather than consumer, identify the type and size of business you are after. Location, industry and their customer base are all important. Again, the more specific and detailed this information is, the more wisely you will be able to spend your marketing dollars.

CHALLENGES & COMPETITIVE ANALYSIS

Identify your company's challenges, for example, perhaps you are not in an area conducive to walk-in business or your firm needs to hire additional employees in the first quarter, etc. Then set a time frame to address each challenge or develop a strategy to deal with each one.

You should also make a list of your company's strengths. What is your competitive advantage? Be realistic and specific however, and avoid vague sentences such as, "We are the best at what we do."

Your competitive analysis should include a list of all competitors, their strengths and weaknesses. Don't forget to include national competitors, for example, if you own a local mortgage company serving Rockland County, national firms that advertise on TV should be considered competition because they are reaching your target audience.

Consider how each one markets their business; what you like and dislike about their techniques or strategies and how you would like to differentiate yourself from each one.

ANNUAL BUDGET

Next, identify your annual budget which will help you streamline the rest of the planning process. For example, a small business with an annual budget of \$10,000 will have a much different marketing approach than one with a \$100,000 budget. A rule of thumb is to commit 5 -10% of your annual gross sales to marketing.

MARKETING VEHICLES

Next identify the vehicles that will reach your market:

- Newspaper advertising (daily, weekly, trades)
- Trade publications (regional, national)
- Google and other pay per click vehicles
- Website/banner ad advertising
- Radio advertising
- Public relations support (press release distribution, writing and placing articles)
- Television advertising (cable as well as regional or national)
- Direct mail
- Infomercials
- e-mail marketing

This section will take some leg work. If you decide that you want to advertise in local papers you will need to decide if you are interested in the daily paper and if so, what section, how often, black and white or color, etc. Or if you decide to advertise in weekly or monthly papers, there are usually many to choose from and while they are less expensive than the daily papers, you will have to decide if they reach your target market.

The biggest mistake people make with advertising is they don't make a long-term commitment. You shouldn't expect to take one big ad and have it turn your business around. People generally do not see an ad until they need a specific service, then they think back to which ads they have seen recently or heard on the radio. Advertising only works if you 1) make a commitment to it, 2) have a well designed ad and, 3) are in the right media to reach your market.

Small businesses should consider advertising in trade publications, which can often be less expensive, and pay per click advertising. For example with Google's advertising program you can specify that you only want to locate customers searching on specific keywords within a 20 mile radius of your location with a maximum spend of \$10 per day. We have had several clients use this strategy with tremendous success, well surpassing the daily newspaper advertising they had done in the past.

Don't forget the many free and low cost opportunities that exist to promote your business such as speaking engagements, cross-promotions, surveys, thank you notes, e-mailing to past customers, hosting seminars, press releases about new services or products, sponsoring a little league team or community event, board involvement for a local charity, etc. You are only limited by your imagination. One retail shop owner I know brings her Yorkshire Terrier to work to sit on her counter all day. She said her business has increased 30% since bringing him to work!

CALENDAR AND GOALS

Finally develop a marketing calendar to stay on track. Identify dates by which certain tasks will be accomplished. Next set goals that will help you determine if the plan has been successful. You should have some goals that are easily attainable (to have a sense of accomplishment) but also include some 'stretch' goals; for example, don't be afraid to state that you want to increase business by 50% by December 31st. But also include a goal of trying three new marketing tactics by June 1st.

Finally, remember to be flexible, if something doesn't seem to be working after giving it an honest try, move on and consider other options. The more creative you are, the more successful you will be.

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